

Turning and Returning by BinarySunrise

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Genre: Character Study, Coming of Age, F/M, Fluff and Angst, LGBTQ Themes, Non-Explicit Sex, Past Abuse, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Slice of Life, Will Byers and Eleven | Jane Hopper Are Best Friends, and frank discussion of adult issues, and so are el and max, lots of dealing with trauma and abuse, teen sexuality, the el learns about consent fic, this is mileven but there's other stuff happening too!, will and mike and el all really love each other

Language: English

Characters: Becky Ives, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Terry Ives, Will Byers

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Summary:

Hopper doesn't directly ask her about what happened in the lab until a month after the Snowball.

or El learns that growing up doesn't mean forgetting.

Turning and Returning

Author's Note:

hello friends, i'm still in chicago and patiently working on chapters for both of my multi-chapter stories, but in the meantime i thought i'd post another one of these ancient one shots. this one is definitely a little more angsty, and deals with some pretty adult themes, so check out warnings in the end notes if you're concerned!

this is another one of my old one-shots, edited to account for season 2. when i rewatched stranger things season 1 right before the second season came out i kind of realized that el not understanding that getting changed in front of mike, dustin, and lucas might imply that she probably had to undress in front of brenner and his goons (bc if they'd had her go to a separate room, wouldn't she have known to do that with the party?), and i found that pretty gross and wanted to write a fic about el learning about consent and healthy physical intimacy. this one is pretty adult (though not smutty), so please check the warnings if you're concerned.

the title is from berlin's "take my breath away", which is my personal mileven anthem

comments, kudos, and bookmarks are all super appreciated! responding to comments is my favorite thing in the world so please tell me what you think!!

Hopper doesn't directly ask her about what happened in the lab until a month after the Snowball. Before, they both just know that he knows, that he's seen the room El slept in and the people who hurt her and that he won't let it happen to her again if he can help it. El is grateful. The simplest of sentences still take so much effort, arranging words in her head and getting them to come out of her mouth in the right order never effortless in the same way as the others. She knows

she's getting better, full sentences becoming a little easier each day, but she often doubts if she'll ever catch up. Everyone around her is so full of words and even though El is improving, it hurts that she isn't, that she just can't. She's glad she doesn't have to find the words to tell Hop about how all the air in the room seemed to disappear when they put her in solitary confinement, how she couldn't even breathe enough to scream after enough time had passed. How she used to struggle with knowing that she could kill her way out of a lot of the pain and that Papa would be pleased with her for doing it. That's the decision that hurts her the most. Everything that made Papa happy hurt someone, and if she didn't do it she was the one who got hurt.

Hop often brings Mike over, putting his bike in the back of the cruiser and taking him to the cabin after school so they can do homework together. Mike answers all her questions and gives her little smiles that make her stomach flutter over the books and papers, and El is starting to think the word for what she feels for him is love. On Saturdays, the whole party comes over, even Max, who El apologized to at the Snowball after seeing her kiss Lucas. Sometimes Steve Harrington does too.

"So have they always been this gross, or was it more of a gradual process? I honestly can't imagine them being any other way," Max asks one evening, gesturing to where El is curled into Mike's side on the couch. Hop is perched on an old fold out chair he dug out, pretending that he's not watching them all fondly from over his book.

"Nope, it was instantaneous," Dustin answers, grinning at both of them. Mike's face is pink when El peeks up at him, but his arm wraps around her shoulders, pulling her more snugly to him still. "I mean, El totally went for it. She tried to get naked in front of all of us the night we found her and Mike was like, yep, this is the love of my life."

He winks at El to let her know that he's joking, that he's not making fun of her. Friends joke about each other, tease each other sometimes, but it doesn't mean it's unkind. El is still learning. Mike is more affected, glowering and telling Dustin to shut up, but it's Hopper's reaction that surprises her when El glances at him. His knuckles are white and sharp-cornered where they're gripping his book. There is something in his face El has not seen since the drive to

the Gate, when he told her about black holes.

Later, after everyone is gone (Mike had leaned in to kiss the corner of El's mouth and gone even pinker, and El had tilted her head so that the kiss was full and perfect, his lips chapped and cold and still sending sparks of warmth through her) Hopper asks her about it for the first time.

"El, sweetheart," he starts. This is what alerts El that something is wrong. She's only ever sweetheart when he's very worried about her, when she has nightmares and wakes up crying, when she sees something that reminds her of the lab and goes quiet and afraid. "I didn't want to have to make you talk about any of this, but maybe it's a good idea. Can you answer a few questions for me?"

El nods, not knowing what else to do. They're sitting at the rickety table, a mug of hot chocolate steaming under El's curled hands, Hopper sipping a can of beer. He doesn't seem to know what to do either, opening his mouth and closing it several times before he finally forms a question.

"Did Brenner and his men make you undress in front of them?"

El nods. She remembers the wrongness of being naked in front of them, especially when she got older, in the months leading up to her escape. She didn't like having so much skin showing, like they might try to peel it back to see what was going on beneath it. Papa had always loved seeing what was happening inside her, hooking her up with machines that told him things El still doesn't understand, even now that she's learning science. He used to mutter things like "fascinating" and "unbelievable" under his breath. Hopper pinches the bridge of his nose for a moment, mouth working silently.

"Okay, kid, okay. Did they, uh, did they ever touch you?"

El nods, confused. He knows they did. His sigh is slow, sad-sounding to El. She doesn't know how to fix it. She never does.

"Sorry, my bad. I worded that poorly. I mean did they ever touch any of...of the places on your body you don't see unless you take your clothes off?"

Oh. That is different. El knows about privacy now, knows that there are parts of yourself you aren't supposed to show anyone. She never thought about what made Papa and his men think they had the right to see those parts of her when everyone outside of the lab thinks they are for her alone behind closed doors. She hadn't known you could touch those places, that it is bad to do so.

"No," she says, unequivocal. Hopper breathes a sigh of relief and finally smiles at her. Just a quirk of his mouth, but it's enough for El to return.

"Okay, kid. That's all I wanted to know. You want some Eggos?"

She had them earlier, full of whipped cream and chocolate chips, but El will never say no to Eggos. She knows Hopper will probably mutter something about spoiling her as she eats, but still offer her seconds, that they will maybe watch the T.V. before bed and Hopper will pretend he doesn't follow the plot of whatever soap ends up being on.

It will be normal. A routine. Something El can understand.

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Sometimes, they spend the night at the Byers house, because Hopper feels about Joyce almost the way El feels about Mike (El doesn't believe anyone could want someone as much as she wants Mike), even though he's not ready to admit it to her. Also, El and Will are friends. They don't need to say a lot to each other, and Will is less comfortable with explaining things to her than Mike, Dustin, or even Max, but it sometimes feels very important that El can sometimes sit with someone who doesn't feel the need to educate her, who knows better than anyone can, even Mike. Will is the one she talks to the most after Mik.

"I can't tell anyone, because I'd seem like an asshole," Will tells El. They're lying in his bed, El's head pillowed against his shoulder. She can feel Will's cheek move against her as he talks. He's the only one other than Mike she's comfortable touching like this, who she never flinches away from. "But I'm sick of them telling me I'm normal, even my mom. I'm not normal. None of this is normal. Jonathan says he's

a weirdo, but even he's normal compared to me. I just want them to get that I'm not the old Will."

"I think I am the opposite," El says thoughtfully. Will's fingers are playing with her hair. It feels very good. "I want them to know that I am not going to stop being the old Eleven."

"That makes sense," Will says. His chin is sharp against El's cheekbone when he nods. "Do you—maybe I'm even weirder, for hating it when people pretend that I'm okay. Fake it 'till you make it, right?"

"Fake it 'till you make it?" El echoes.

"Like, if you pretend something long enough, it's supposed to come true."

"That's dumb," El says. She thinks about how she'd feel if she woke up from a bad dream and tried to pretend that it wasn't about anything real. She thinks she'd go crazy, wondering what it was okay to be scared of, sad about, angry about. "You can't go back," she says decisively.

"I guess you really can't," Will says, like El's said something helpful. "Hey, El?"

"Uh-huh?"

Will is silent for so long El tilts her head to look at him. His face is pinched around what might be a secret.

"I don't know if I can tell you really, not yet but—I don't think I'll ever have what you have with Mike," he says. El fixes her eyes ahead again fast enough to make herself dizzy, staring so hard at the drawings pinned to the opposite wall she can see the individual crayon strokes, rough and bright. She knows him well enough to understand that Will doesn't want her to see his face right now. Surprisingly, El thinks she has the words.

"There are lots of ways to love someone," she says, thinking of Joyce's forehead kisses, of Hopper's lips in her hair and moving just enough El can't always tell if it's a kiss or if he's telling her something

he's not quite ready for her to hear. Mike's lips and their soft fire, and the peck Will gave her on the cheek after the Gate, to say thank you. She remembers Mike talking about what it was like while she was gone. They all missed her, but Will was the only one to keep sitting in the fort with him in the later months, listening. Mike would sometimes look into his eyes and see El staring back at him. Haunted, asking for something Mike couldn't give.

"Even though I'm weird?" Will asks, so softly the question almost dissolves into her hair.

"I'm weird too," El says. This is what she loves most about Will, even sometimes over Mike. It is not just knowing what to say. It is *knowing*, deep in her gut. "A weirdo. And I have what I have with Mike. Why shouldn't you, one day?"

Will is silent for a long moment, in which El thinks she can hear both of their heartbeats, perfectly in time.

"Mike said you would understand. He said you always did. I always believed him." His voice is going slow now, but El can still feel the tension in his body. She doesn't know a lot of things, but she knows what it's like to be afraid to surrender, even if it's only to sleep.

"I'm glad," she whispers. And then, because she can't help herself: "What else did he say about me?"

She feels Will's smile.

"He said you were pretty, but that you were scary. Like Galadriel. That you were beautiful but everyone knew you could screw them up and that it made you even cooler."

"Who's Galadriel?" El asks. His arm is finally going limp around her.

"Y'know, if you ask Mike that, he might die of happiness," Will says.

It is not the first time they've slept in the same bed. Hopper didn't like it at first, but somehow Joyce had made him understand. El does not crave Will the way she does Mike, and he doesn't her, and that is why it can only be them. Neither of them wants to be a body alone in the dark.

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Hop drives her to see mama on Saturdays so that El can sit and put on a soap she likes and hold her hand while they watch together. It's starting to sink in that she'll never get the easy hugs and whispered 'sweetheart's Joyce gives Will, never get to bat away her mama's fussing hands the way Mike does his mother when she tries to fix his hair for him, lamenting that he needs a haircut. It's not the sharp, close pain of being separated from Mike eighteen months ago, of losing him the moment she'd discovered how happy he made her. It's a duller pain, of realizing she has lost long ago something vital she can never regain or replace, and it doesn't eat away at El in the same way some things from her past do, but she often cries quietly during the car rides home.

"You know, kid," Hopper starts, pretending like he always does that he can't see her wet cheeks, "Your friends would probably like to come with you. It's up to you, but I bet it would mean a lot to Wheeler if you let him come up with us sometime."

El wipes the back of her hand over her running nose and imagines sitting in mama's house with Mike, holding both their hands. Mike would fill up all the silences like he always does, telling her about what he did at school that day and how excited he is for when she starts with him, reading aloud to her, or just sitting with her and letting her touch him to remind herself that he's really there.

"I'm trying to be independent," she says reluctantly. Hopper had told her once, during an argument, that she couldn't rely on Mike to hold her hand through everything, that El had to be able to look after herself.

"I know. I'm really proud of you," Hop says simply. "But this is a different situation, kid. I just meant that you had to get used to the idea that you aren't gonna be around Wheeler twenty-four seven, but everyone relies on their, um, their loved ones for support for hard things like this."

"Black hole things?" El asks. She knows that tone of voice, knows when Hop is sinking into his own sadness, the empty corners inside El will probably never be able to fill. He knows that old sadness as

well as she does, knows all about things you can't replace. He hates to talk about his little girl, the one who is gone, but he did one more time after that car ride to the Gate. He told El that he wasn't trying to fill the empty shoes Sarah left with her. *You're a different kid, and I care about you differently. Not better or worse.*

Sometimes you can love different people in the same way.

"Yeah, it's a black hole thing. If you're getting sucked into one, and you have someone to suck you back out you shouldn't be afraid to ask them for help. Everyone does that, kid. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Doesn't mean you aren't independent."

So Mike comes with them next time. He sits in the back of the car and teaches her a game, his eyes shining every time she asks a question. He only thinks of things El's already learned about, squeezes her hand reassuringly every time she falters in the face of how few words she really knows compared to him.

"Is it bigger than...a microwave?" El asks. Mike shakes his head, his hair flopping in his eyes. He'd given her tips on what kind of questions to ask—comparison was good, and finding out dimensions and location was very helpful. El's narrowed it down to something that is in Hawkins, that Mike himself has seen and that El has seen too, that makes noise and is smaller than a microwave.

"Smaller than a shoe box?" she asks again, thinking of the one her new converse came in. She'd wanted to keep the white ones, but they'd started to pinch her toes. The new ones are pink, and Mike wrote his name on the side in sharpie. He dotted the 'i' with a heart. El traces the letters with her finger sometimes when he's not with her and she wishes he were.

"Yeah, maybe half the size?" Mike says. He said during the rules that he was only supposed to answer 'yes' or 'no', but he can't stop trying to help her. El pointed it out to him sternly the first few times, and Mike had blushed and promised not to do it again. Now, she doesn't mind. They're getting close to mama's house, and she wants to finish the game.

"Okay. Is it...is it one of a kind or are there lots of them?"

If he's not going to answer with a 'yes' or 'no', then El is going to ask questions that don't require them for answers. Mike doesn't seem to notice the change.

"One of a kind," he says, a secret little smile on his face. His cheeks are pink, the place where their hands make contact damp with his sweat. She doesn't mind at all.

"Does it belong to you?"

"Yes!" Mike almost shouts, causing Hop to bark a warning from the driver's seat, and when Mike blushes and ducks his head El knows she's getting close. She squeezes his hand even tighter and bites her lip, thinking hard about the information she has. When she glances back at Mike, he's looking at her with a strange intensity, his face glowing with rosiness.

"What?" she asks, and he turns even redder.

"Nothing. Just...you look really cute when you bite your lip like that."

El wrinkles her nose. Cute isn't bad, but it's for bunny rabbits and baby kittens. You aren't supposed to kiss bunny rabbits and baby kittens.

"Cute?" she repeats.

"In a good way," Mike says quickly. "Like, um, pretty-cute."

El nods seriously. 'Pretty' she is familiar with, and she knows from experience that Mike does want to kiss 'pretty'.

"You look cute when you're pink here," El returns, and reaches out to brush his cheek. His skin is very warm under her fingertips, and her finger is a conduit to his shiver. El's arms break out in goosebumps.

"Hey, no funny business back there!" Hop snaps, and El withdraws her hand so fast Mike snorts with laughter. El giggles too, because Mike's smile makes her want to smile, and the answer comes to her suddenly.

“You’re thinking of Rory the Dinosaur,” she announces triumphantly. Mike’s grin is huge and crooked. He shines at her.

“You got me. You’re going to take school by storm when you’re all caught up. You learn everything so fast.”

El can’t stop looking at him, at how he seems to glow at her. She gazes deep into his eyes and finds her own face, curved and glittering as it would be in the back of a spoon, like something has gone round inside of her.

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Joyce takes her and Max shopping for school clothes in August, because El is growing so quickly Hop wants to put off buying her new things as long as possible so she can’t just grow out of them again in the blink of an eye. They drive to the next town over and go to Sears at a shopping center, a place filled with glassy windows full of bright colors El wants to reach out and touch. She gets to. Joyce gives her strict instructions to try on anything she likes, and they’ll work out what’s reasonable to buy later. Max helps.

“You like the girly stuff, huh?” she asks as El fingers a lacy blouse.

“Okay?” she asks, withdrawing her hand. Max doesn’t really wear skirts, or blouses, or even dresses. She wears shirts with long sleeves and jeans. It’s different from how Nancy Wheeler dressed. El thought Nancy was how all girls were supposed to look, but maybe girls can wear whatever they want. Maybe there is more than one way to be pretty.

“Yeah, of course,” Max says with a toothy smile. “It’s not really my style, but you should get whatever you like, El. Whatever you feel good wearing.”

El tries on sundresses in pastel shades, skirts and shorts that will leave her legs bare and cool in the summer heat, jeans that are comfortable, and some soft cotton tee shirts in colors she likes. Melon, cherry red, sunshine yellow, and best of all, a pale pink that reminds her of that first dress, now much too small for her. Max bites her lip and looks El over when she emerges with the tee shirts.

“Hey, I think we probably need to look at underwear if you want to buy those. They’re pretty thin.”

El glances at the tee shirts. Her body is changing, growing softer and sometimes sore to the touch, widening through the hips and narrowing at the waist. She’d gotten her period early July, and Joyce had talked her through what it meant and how to take care of it. She’d called it becoming a woman. El is still happy about it. She never noticed that she was growing in the lab, where everything—most of all her body—had been static. No hair inching towards her shoulder blades, no Hopper to stand her up against the wall and pen little marks to show how much taller she’d grown. Part of that discussion had been bras. El thinks this is probably what Max means.

“I need a bra, right?” she asks.

“Yep,” Max says, looking a little relieved that she doesn’t have to explain it. “Wheeler’s gonna explode from all the energy it takes for him to not look at your chest one of these days, and you probably want to keep him around.”

Her breasts are one of the areas people are not supposed to see or touch. El only ever tracks their progress when she gets dressed and undressed, and she remembers Hopper’s words: “The parts of your body you can’t see without taking off your clothes”. The parts she didn’t like Papa and his men seeing, even if she hadn’t known why. But the idea that Mike might have looked is different. She thinks of him trying not to and noticing anyway and her whole body flushes like she has a fever. It’s not the kind of fever that makes El want to sleep for days on end. It’s the kind that makes her want to do something to distract herself.

“Is it bad that he looks?” she asks. If it is, El must be just as bad for maybe wanting him to.

“I guess if anyone should, it’s him. It’s, um—look, El, it’s a sex thing. Do you know about sex?” asks Max, looking supremely uncomfortable, but the set of her chin is stubborn.

“It makes babies,” El answers. Joyce didn’t really explain why or how, just that El was too young for it. Max nods.

“Yeah, but it’s something people do for fun too when they’re older. Mike looking at you is a sex thing. He tries not to because he thinks you don’t know about it and feels guilty. Sex stuff is only cool if you both want it.”

Want. It’s a word Hopper’s stressed the importance of. What does El want? Ask for it with words. Express it. She can’t always get what she wants, but that doesn’t mean she shouldn’t try.

“Mike thinks I do not want him to look,” El tries, thinking hard, “but if I do want him to, then it’s okay?”

“Yeah, kind of,” Max says, her smile encouraging. “That goes for everything with sex. You have to want it, and you have to be old enough to know you want it. You can’t be, um—do you know what coerced means?”

El shakes her head.

“It means to be talked into, or forced. Like, um, if someone with more power than you, like someone’s who’s older, or who you need something from, tries to talk you into doing something, that’s coercion, even if you agree to it. Because they have power over you, you weren’t really agreeing on your own, right?”

Something clicks into place, and El suddenly understands why Hopper was afraid when he found out about Papa and his men seeing her naked. She was dependent on them. She had to do what they said. She wasn’t showing them her body because she wanted to—she can’t imagine a single situation where she would want to—she was doing it because she thought she had to. Like every other thing they made her do in the lab. El used to think some of it was her fault. Finding people in the bath, training to hurt people, really hurting them to save herself—but it wasn’t. She was coerced.

It feels like something’s been lifted out of her. Something heavy and poisonous, drawn out with a suddenness that’s almost painful. It’s not her fault. None of it is her fault. El feels so light she thinks she could fly if she wanted to.

“If we both want something, and there’s nothing making me think I

have to want it, that's good," El says. She's shaking slightly, she realizes, gripping the tee shirts very tightly, her palms sweating through the cotton. "But if it's the other way, then that's bad, and I shouldn't do it."

"Exactly. Don't do anything you don't want to do," Max says firmly. "Now come on, let's go buy you some bras."

The conversation sticks out in El's mind for a long time, the words tethering her when she wakes up cold with shame, when she sees a cat in the street and remembers, the times with the party when Will drifts somewhere far away from them and El knows he is thinking of the Upside Down. She wants to think that it's her fault for creating it. But it wasn't. She made it because she was afraid. She didn't want to find the monster. She was coerced.

"You okay?" Mike asks her. He's holding her hand as El thinks this through, staring very hard at Will as she does. Mike's eyes are dark with concern, and El's heart pounds in her chest with a feeling far away from fear. Mike will never coerce her.

El turns her head to peck him on the lips and watches his face flood with color, a smile quirking his mouth when she pulls away. She remembers what Max said about Mike not being sure if El wanted and feeling guilty for not being certain if she liked the same things he did.

"I like it when you kiss me," she says, in lieu an answer. It is the answer. Mike's smile broadens, and he is the one to kiss her this time, his lips sugary and tart from the sour patch kids they've been sharing. El leans into it and cups the back of his neck to draw him closer to her, where his skin is hot and his hair curls softly over her hand. It is the taste of certainty.

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By Sophomore year it seems like sex is all the people at school talk about. Dustin comes to school one day with a bruise on his neck, and El gradually pieces together the things that couples do with each other, things her and Mike haven't even tried. Making out, giving hickies, first and second and third base. She feels almost as lost as she

did when Mike found her in the woods two years ago. She has the vocabulary to express her most basic needs (the word consent has been added to the word coercion as one she thinks about frequently), but not enough to pick up the nuances. The students at school talk about sex like they fear it as much as they seem to long for it. Some of the girls refer to it as 'it' in the bathrooms, in their giggling conversations in the hallways, as if just saying the word is enough to summon something forbidden and dangerous.

El is often afraid, but after all the things she has seen and been through, sex isn't one of them. From health class, Joyce gently giving her a talk, and Max occasionally explaining things, El draws a few conclusions: people are afraid of sex because they think it's the closest two people can be to each other. It hurts the first time for the girl, but not for the boy. If a girl does it too much, she becomes the kind of girl people whisper about, but the same doesn't happen for boys. It can give someone diseases or make a girl pregnant if they don't protect themselves. Pain doesn't frighten El, but people whispering about her behind her back does. She's used to being called names, to having her strangeness commented on in whispers, and the sting hasn't lessened. She sometimes wonders if people will whisper about her if she ever has sex with Mike, if she'll become the wrong sort of girl.

El asks Max one day. They're sitting on the bleachers and watching football practice while they wait for the boys to finish up in the AV room, Max smoking a cigarette. El doesn't like the smell, and Max exhales so the smoke blows away from their faces, a small, crucial kindness. El still regrets pushing Max away from the start. She wants every second of friendship she can get. She still can't believe she refused any willingly.

"If I slept with Mike, would I be a—a slut?" she asks, testing out both the euphemism and the slur. It's hard to keep track of all the words people use for sex, but 'sleeping with' is one of the ones she hears the most. 'Doing it' is another, and there are more Dustin sometimes uses. Fucking, screwing. When El tries those words, they feel ugly in her mouth, vulgar and heavy on her tongue. Kissing is a pretty word for something that makes her feel good, and 'sleeping with' is the closest she can think of for sex.

“Oh my god, have you? Has he asked you to?” Max asks, extinguishing her cigarette abruptly and looking at El with wide eyes. “If he’s pressuring you—”

“He’s not coercing me,” El says. The idea of Mike forcing her to do anything is just silly. “I’m just curious. I heard some girls talking.”

“Sleeping with your boyfriend after dating for years wouldn’t make you a slut, El,” Max says gently. “I don’t think you’re ready for that, though it’s ultimately your call. Sluts sleep around with lots of boys they aren’t dating. Honestly, girls shouldn’t have to worry about that hypocritical bullshit at all. If it feels good, why should we get called names for doing it while the boys can fuck anything that moves without anyone batting an eye?”

“That’s stupid,” El agrees. She’d thought it was unfair a month ago when someone spray-painted the word whore on Cassie Bennett’s locker after she went to third base with a boy at a party. No one had spray-painted anything on the boy’s locker. It’s a relief that Max also doesn’t understand why only girls get in trouble for sex things. El’s learned that there are things she doesn’t know because she never learned them, and larger questions no one seems to know the answer to.

“Does it really feel good?” she asks, a little wistfully. El knows that she’s too young, that they’re both too young, but a part of her wonders. Every time she touches Mike it sends sparks through her, no matter how small their contact. When she kisses him, her stomach flutters and her skin feels like it won’t stop tingling until he puts his hands on it. Sometimes El feels like she wants to be as close to him as possible, wants to crawl out of her skin and into him, to be a part of him. Maybe that closeness is why people have sex.

“I mean, people wouldn’t do it if it didn’t. Not that I have,” Max says quickly. “I’ve just, you know.” She makes a vague sweeping gesture towards the low-riding waistband of her jeans. El frowns, not sure if she should ask.

“You haven’t touched yourself at all?” Max asks shrewdly. El’s face heats as she shakes her head. She knows what Max means. Dustin’s constantly making jokes about jerking off, but El hadn’t known it was

something girls could do too.

"If you're comfortable, you should try it," Max says, sounding collected as ever, though there are pink spots burning high on her cheeks. "You can figure out what feels nice, and then if you and Mike decide to take the next step, you can guide him through it, because he'll be absolutely useless. If you so much as show him a boob he'll go totally brain dead."

El thinks it all over. When Mike meets her by her locker the next day at lunch, she takes his hand.

"Do you trust me?" she asks, because Mike wanting these things is important too.

"With my life," he says without hesitation.

"Can we be late to lunch today?"

"I'm sure Dustin will more than make up for any gaps we leave in the conversation," Mike says wryly, smiling. "They can manage without us for ten minutes."

El leads him outside, to where the trees converge on the football field. It's quiet out here, dim chatter from the few people eating on the bleachers almost white noise under the nipping October breeze, the thick, sweet smell of freshly mown grass hanging over them with a weight that is nearly physical. El presses herself against one of the trees, draws Mike to her, and kisses him with her mouth open. He makes a small, shocked noise, his hands tightening where they've instinctively settled over the swell of her hips. He draws back to look at her with dark eyes. His whole face is flushed.

"This is okay?" he asks, licking his lips. El tracks the movement, and the feverish part of her that is drawing him even closer wants him to do it to hers. "I didn't want—"

"I want," El says firmly, looping her hands around his neck and bringing him so close she can feel his breath against her cheek. Fluttering. "Is it okay for you?"

"Kissing?" Mike's tongue darts out again, a gesture both nervous and wanting. The pink flick of it makes her want to squirm into him, until she is touching as much of him as possible.

"God, El. I could kiss you forever," Mike says. His voice is dark, smoky around the edges. He sounds older. El remembers when she heard his voice for the first time in three-hundred and fifty-three days, two years and half years ago, how the strangeness of it had made her newly shy around him for a few months. Now, it only makes her want him.

"Good," El says and tries again.

At first, their noses bump painfully, but Mike cups his hand over the nape of her neck, where all of El's baby hairs are standing on end, and guides her, his palm hot against her skin as he adjusts the angle. For a long, uncomfortable moment, his mouth just works against hers, neither of them knowing what to do except to breathe each other in. Finally, Mike starts to lick into her mouth, and El mimics him, testing the sharp-smooth edges of his teeth, tasting the startled warmth of his tongue. Something halfway between a gasp and a moan blooms between them, and she is not sure who it belongs to. It doesn't seem to matter. A part of her had been afraid of this. She'd heard some girls whispering that it felt slimy, that it was too wet and kind of gross, but all El feels is close to Mike and wanting to be closer. She sucks his tongue until he groans and shivers against him, the vibrations crawling velvet hot under her skin. His hands are tight in her hair as she sucks his lower lip, working it until it is red and swollen. Mike is pinning her against the tree now, his arms fencing her in, but she doesn't feel trapped at all.

El learned in biology about the preservation of fossils in amber, how once bugs became trapped in it they could remain perfectly preserved for millions of years. She wishes she could pour amber over this moment. She wants to be suspended forever in the honey-slow sweetness of it; Mike exploring her mouth like it's an undiscovered country, her chasing after the traces of apple juice still lingering under his tongue from breakfast. El's never felt more like she belongs to him, and he to her. It is the gentlest form of possession.

...

The Fourth of July is blisteringly hot, even as it darkens and melts through anything that might have resembled a sunset. The sky finally settles into a flat dusty lavender that cannot seem to muster the warmth to be truly purple. El is sixteen and two thirds, wearing a shirt that's gone a bit see-through from sweat and shorts that do not help her thighs stop chafing from the heat. She's still sticky all over with watermelon juice, and when Mike draws her behind the tree in the Wheeler backyard to kiss her she coaxes the taste out of his mouth too, underneath something burnt and smoky that is probably barbeque. She feels glued to him, messy and loose and almost melting. The kiss progresses into inappropriate stickiness, and Dustin breaks it up with catcalls and a sparkler.

"C'mon, El, it's your favorite part," he says, pulling her away from Mike. Lucas and Max are already lighting rain showers, small ones that don't go very high. El still finds them mesmerizing. Will is sitting on the porch bench with his knees tucked to his chest and his chin resting on them, and El sees something in his face that makes her bring him one of the sparklers.

"Come light these with Mike and me?" she asks. Will takes her hand, and Mike understands instinctively as he always does. The yard is big, and there is room for them away from where Max is smoking a cigarette and Dustin and Lucas are taking turns sipping from a flask. El had already tried it and hated how it burned down her throat. They stand in a circle to watch the sparklers sputter out, spitting pinpricks of light into the dusk. The sprinklers score a soft music behind them, almost eerie. It reminds El of rain.

"Pretty," she says to break the heavy silence, the word falling between them like a memory. She glances up at Will from across their small circle and his eyes meet hers, hazel green and glowing like—like illuminated microscope slides of some exotic underwater biome. There are swamps in there, somewhere. It is strangely like looking into a mirror.

"I have an idea," Mike says, when they've gone through the sparklers. "Let's go to Castle Byers, just the three of us. I can take the station wagon."

Max and Lucas are the ones making out now, and Dustin is still

milking the rain showers when they make to leave.

"Where are you losers going?" he shouts. "There's still booze! We were going to play Never Have I Ever."

"Ugh, are we gonna play truth or dare too?" Max asks, though she still looks kind of excited, her face flushed from sunburn and Lucas. "What is this, middle school?"

"We're tired. I'm going to take El and Will home," Mike says. The firm adulthood of his voice makes El want to kiss him so badly it is almost a physical pain.

"A likely story," Dustin says, but he's already waving them away. "Whatever, go and have your fromage à trois. We cool kids can have plenty of fun without you."

"It's ménage à trois," El calls sweetly as they leave, because she's taking French, and Will laughs, still not quite free enough, but better than what she'd just glimpsed in the dark.

Castle Byers is spooky at night, and El shivers a little looking at it, sensing it when Will hesitates beside her. But it is not cold here in the middle of July, and there is no rot, no vines, no monsters to hide from. The woods are crisp and clean around them, and as her eyes adjust to the dark she can slip away from the memory of the void, of Barb's body and the deathly pallor of Will's face. She takes Will's hand in the one that isn't still gripping Mike's and leads them both in. It's a tight fit, but El doesn't mind the closeness, even if they're all sweaty and smelling of grass and barbeque.

"What's Never Have I Ever?" she asks.

"It's a dumb party game, like truth or dare, but designed to get you drunk," Mike answers, rolling his eyes. El nods her understanding. She's played truth or dare, once, during freshman year with only Max. She'd dared El to call Mike and tell him she loved him and that was the first time they'd said the words out loud.

"How do you play?" she asks, because truth or dare had been fun, and even if Max had kept saying how dumb it was, El could tell she

had had fun too.

"You go in a circle and say something you've never done before, and if you've done it, you have to drink. We can do it now if you want," Mike offers. "There's no rule that says you can't do it without booze. We could just, like, say if we've done it."

"I want to do it," Will says, with a sudden, bright intensity that takes both of them by surprise.

"Sure," Mike says, concealing it well. "I'll start, yeah? Never have I ever...made a mouthbreather piss his pants."

El giggles as she raises her hand. She meets Will's eyes again and the laughter fades with one of the flashes of insight she gets into him sometimes, even more than she does with Mike. Whatever he wants to say isn't just a part of the game. It's important, and he wants her to go next.

"Never have I ever...drunk so much I was sick."

"Good thing Dustin's not here," Will mutters. Mike grins at him.

"You still have to raise your hand. El didn't specify what kind of drink, and I have a distinct memory of you drinking so much kool-aid at Lucas' eighth birthday party you barfed in the jumping castle."

"Don't remind me," Will says as he raises his hand, but he's deadly serious again, looking at them with that quiet intensity El knows she gets herself, the kind so sharp it cuts into the space between two people like a knife. It makes them uncomfortable, makes them call her and Will weirdos. El isn't uncomfortable.

"Your turn," she says, not making it a suggestion. Will inhales deeply, not looking at Mike. He doesn't look away from El.

"Never have I ever wanted to kiss a girl," he says. He does not say it fast, and he does not whisper. El knows enough now to know what it means that he's telling them this, to remember the secret he couldn't yet tell her two years ago and put the pieces together. She is suddenly so overwhelmed by his trust she thinks she might cry. Will is the one who has changed the least physically in those three years—he still

has floppy hair, those huge eyes that change color with the light, the same soft voice—but for a moment El sees the shadow of the man he'll grow into. It's not just gratefulness for his trust that is making her want to cry—it's pride.

And when Mike finally speaks, it swells up in El's heart until she thinks she'll burst open from it.

"Guilty on that front, but only with one girl," he says, raising his hand and smiling the same smile he gave her at the edge of the quarry, when he told her that she wasn't the monster. That she'd saved him. This time, it's El that initiates a hug between three of her friends, looping her arms around Will and pressing her cheek against his as Mike's wrap around both of them. Will's cheek is wet against hers, and El knows her own tears are spilling hot down her face when she remembers that day, the way Mike looked at her even though the wig was gone, Dustin screaming after Troy. It was the first time El had realized that some bad words can mean good things from the right people—crazy, weirdo, queer, strange—and she wants Will to understand that as well as she does, wants it to seep into him through the contact of their skin. Osmosis.

"Thank you," Will whispers, clinging tighter to both of them.

"Thank you," Mike says. El knows his voice well enough to know that he is crying too.

They stay there for a long time, connected, loving each other and stronger for it. Her best friends.

...

Junior Year, El dyes her hair blonde. It's not something she does for any deep reasons, although all the boys seem to think she does it because she's having an identity crisis. El just does it because she doesn't like to be trapped into looking one way. There are days when she wears black and does her makeup like her sister did, days when she wears the frilly, soft-colored things Nancy had favored, and days where she wears Mike's clothes so that she can smell him on her skin long after she's taken them off again.

"Is it okay?" she asks him when he sees her hair for the first time out of school, biting her lip. They're in his basement, watching a movie about Mozart. It's not El's favorite—neither she nor Mike love music the way Will does—but she likes the wigs and the costumes a lot, and she can definitely appreciate what it's like to know you'll never catch up to what comes to someone else as naturally as breathing.

"I like it a lot," Mike says, no lie at all in his voice. El sighs in relief. When she'd arrived at their lunch table with then new highlights Monday, Dustin had exchanged concerned looks with Lucas and Will, and Mike had been startled, though he hid it quickly. Now, he runs his fingers through the new golden streaks in her hair and El knows it really had been only surprise, not disapproval.

"Still pretty?" she asks, just to be sure.

"You could wear a wig like that," Mike says, gesturing to Mozart's powdery-mound of pink-tinged hair on the screen, "and you'd still be the prettiest girl I know, but this is especially pretty. It reminds me of that old wig, but this looks more real."

El had thought of the wig when she had Joyce help her with the dye, but she thinks the final result is better too. More subtle. She crawls into Mike's lap and tugs a strand of hair from his eyes, sweeps her thumb over the plane of his cheekbone and down to rest on the swell of his lower lip. It's wet beneath her touch. She has to kiss him.

"I want to try something," El says after they've kissed enough for their clothes to feel two sizes too small, Mike carefully angling his pelvis away from her so she can't feel his erection. El knows he's not ready for her to touch him. He'd think he was taking advantage of her somehow, even though El is almost always the one to initiate their make-out sessions, always the one to place his hands and let her own wander. It's frustrating, but it's one of the things that make Mike so good for her. It's always El's choice.

She's seventeen now, and she knows the choice she wants to make.

"Touch me?" she asks, refraining from reaching for him, for letting her fingers map his skin as they always do. She doesn't want to do anything to coerce him. Mike's eyes are black.

“You—you’re sure?” he asks, his voice breaking.

“I’ve been sure for a while,” El confesses, finally letting herself touch him, settling her hands on the flat plane of his stomach, a pale sliver where his polo has ridden up. The muscles there flutter at her touch. “I wasn’t sure if you were ready.”

“El, I’m—I’m ready,” Mike says, firmly. He’s so different from the boy who first saved her from the rain, nearly an adult, but some things have changed very little. He’d still crack the door for her so she wouldn’t have to be alone in the dark, would believe in the best in her even against the word of one of his oldest friends. She’s very glad that he was the one she can choose to trust with this, that he was the one who found her and wanted to keep her. “But I don’t, um, I’m not sure I know how?”

El turns herself so her back is flush against his stomach and takes his hand.

“I’ll show you,” she says. She can hear it when Mike swallows heavily. His hand shakes under hers when she guides it down under her skirt, directing his fingers first over damp cotton and then past that final barrier, to where she is already slick and waiting for his touch. Sometimes he fumbles or applies too much pressure, once so much El yelps and jerks away from the friction, but it is the most perfect thing to have ever happened to her body. The moment before she falls apart against him, she holds herself back, suddenly afraid and trembling on the precipice. It feels like—like standing on the edge of the quarry, blue above and below and seemingly infinite. El doesn’t know how Mike made the jump without knowing she was there to float him back to safety. She feels like she imagines he might have felt when she saved him, suspended between water and sky.

When she lets go, the intensity of it scares her. Mike whispers sweet nothings into her hair and strokes her through it, his fingers still wracked with nervous tremors, but achingly gentle, and El does not mind feeling so helpless, blind from pleasure and limp against him. She never knew she could surrender so totally to someone, even Mike.

He learns all the ways to make her come alive under his touch before

he lets her touch him back. El doesn't mind. She lets herself be unselfconsciously greedy, gives herself over to the now confident play of his fingers, the weight of his palm against her breast, the slick heat of his mouth between her legs. When she finally does convince him to let her return the favor, he is so nervous he can't even undo his belt, his other hand cupping her cheek like it is the only thing keeping him tethered to earth.

"El, you don't have to do this," he says, his eyes dark with wanting and so unsure. El kisses the tips of his fingers.

"I can't think of anything I'd rather do right now," she says honestly.

She takes her time. She wants to memorize every part of Mike, to test every place on his body for a reaction. She kisses his fingers again and sucks his thumb into her mouth. She traces the point of his pulse under his ear with her tongue and bites just lightly enough to make him jolt. When she sucks a wet kiss into the inside of his elbow, where the skin is creased with sweat and veins peak out violet, Mike shudders against her. When she does the same the pale skin of his wrist, she can almost taste his heartbeat, and his hand goes to her hair and stays there. The inner ridges of his hipbones are ticklish, and her touch against the place on his navel where his pulse is strongest makes Mike go so quiet El knows he is trying desperately to keep himself under control. She tests the steady thrum of blood there with her fingers again and presses another lingering, open-mouthed kiss, wondering at how it jumps to meet her touch, fluttering madly like the wings of the butterfly. She feels powerful. He's on the verge of falling apart completely under her, and El knows she has the power to put him back together again. She wants to remember what this looks like, wants to look back on it when she feels lost and small and think *I did that. I have that power. That was me.*

She wants to cup this feeling in her hands and put it in a jar. Safe.

"El," Mike gasps, breaking. "Please."

"I want this so much," El tells him, wonderingly.

She cannot remember ever feeling so strong.

...

She comes back from her first year of college and Mike proposes, surprising her and pretty much everybody. He'd gotten into University of Chicago, she hadn't, and when he'd try to follow her to State, El had insisted he go where he really wanted. They made it through three hundred and fifty-three days of not knowing if there would be an end to the waiting, and they can wait a semester knowing exactly when they'll see each other again. It's hard for El to let go at first, but Hopper's lessons on independence must have become as deeply ingrained as *friends don't lie* somewhere along the way. She loves Mike desperately, but El also believes with all of her heart that she can survive without him. It only makes her want him more when she has him.

"We can always wait for grad school," Mike says when he gives her the ring. It's small, silver-plated nickel with their initials engraved, like the one Fred gives Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, one of El's favorite movies. Mike wants to get an orange cat when they move in together, even though he's slightly allergic. El had to talk him out of it. Animals react strangely to her, smelling her fear and her wonder.

"Yes," she agrees, slipping it on her finger. "But it's nice to have a promise."

"We've always loved promises, haven't we?" says Mike, half wry and half prophetic, and kisses her.

Hop takes it very well once he realizes they plan on waiting until after graduation at the very least, and their friends all knew it was coming eventually. El takes Mike up to tell mama. Maybe a part of her hoped for this final, crucial step towards a normal kind of happy would break through something with Terry, that El might restore something else she had lost long before she even knew what she was missing. It doesn't work. Mama is the same as always, and if Mike sees that El has tears in her eyes, he doesn't let on, though he holds on to her hand extra tightly.

"I'm happy for you, Jane," Aunt Becky says as they leave, the name coming out stilted even after all this time, like it still belongs to a

child she is mourning. El has told her what she likes to be called, but she also understands why Aunt Becky can't let go of Jane.

"Thank you," El says, surprised. Aunt Becky has never been very good about emotional things.

"You've grown up into a lovely young lady," she continues, just as awkward, "and you'll do right by yourself. Your mama is proud of you. You've got a good head on your shoulders."

It is the 'is' that prompts El to hug her, startling both of them. Aunt Becky usually talks about mama in the past tense or conditional. But now it's not that mama would be proud of her if things were different. It's that somewhere, underneath it all, she is.

They finally get married in a small civil ceremony after Mike's been accepted into the University of Chicago's English program for grad school and they've settled themselves into an apartment. Being married to Mike is something El falls into with the ease of breathing. It is a relief. So many things were a struggle for so long, but being Mike's wife feels like something she has done for years, like something she's learned how to do in her dreams.

She is four months pregnant and running to the store for milk when she sees the flash of purple hair, still cut the same way after all these years. For a moment, it doesn't even seem possible. A hallucination brought on by the memories these streets still have for El. But then she glimpse's the woman's profile and knows she's not seeing things. She recognizes the set of her sister's mouth—still gritted against the hardness of the world, but no longer quite so angry, maybe. Maybe El just wants to hope.

"Kali?" she asks, feeling like a child again. No cows to milk here. She's wearing a dress that flatters the swell of her stomach and has her hair braided back loosely, but she still feels like a skinny twelve-year-old in overalls and a mop of Shirley Temple curls when her sister turns and lights up in recognition.

"Jane?" she says, hushed, looking at El like she might be one of her illusions. El hasn't felt so wrong-footed in years. She almost expects something strange to happen—for time to slow down, for a detail to

reveal itself as out of place—just to suddenly realize that this is a dream.

But then Kali is rushing towards her with her arms open, and El is dropping her groceries to meet her, hugging her like no time has passed. Not even since those lost hours in '84, but since the Rainbow Room, just the two of them united against the people that would hurt them. El draws away and wipes at wet cheeks, hoping that crying like a baby doesn't make her less bitchin'. But then again, nothing about her is bitchin' at the moment, from her frilly maternity dress to her practical errand-running shoes.

"I've wondered nearly every week what became of you," Kali says. Her eyes are over-bright too, liquid and inky. They're even blacker than Mike's. "I wanted to tell you for years—you were right, Jane. I was so angry. I shouldn't have tried to push that on you, to shame you or bully you into being as bitter as I was. I was a bad sister, I was —"

"Oh, no, no you weren't," El soothes immediately, wrapping her in her arms again and wondering at how the knife-sharp girl who had almost made her kill a man has softened enough to cry freely in front of her. "You were so young, and it all turned out okay. I'm so glad it turned out alright for you too."

"I was so angry," Kali says again. "Without you—Jane, if you hadn't been there, even for such a short time, I don't know what would have happened to me. I'm still angry, but I'm learning to let go. I can't forgive, even after all this time."

"Neither can I," El says. It is easy to remember all the steps she has taken, all the words she has learned. Coercion. Consent. Abuse. There are some things that are unforgiveable. "What happened to the others?" she asks tentatively, not sure if she wants to know the answer.

"Axel and Dottie, I don't know. Mick and I got involved in a program, one that helps kids on the streets. They did poetry with us. It helped. I guess we thought we were too grown up for it at first, but we really were just angry kids. I wrote about the Rainbow Room a lot. And Funshine—he was the only one of us who was really grown up. I

don't see him a lot, but he's happy. He has a kid. But what about you?" Kali asks suddenly, looking her up and down. "Are you—you're pregnant?"

El blushes, her smile watery. Her hands find her stomach instinctively.

"Yes," she confesses, suddenly so grateful that she can share this with the closest thing she has, in a way, to biological family. "The doctor can't tell for sure, but we're almost certain it's a girl. I, um, I'm married to Mike. I guess I never told you about him, but he's the boy who found me when I escaped, the one I had to go back to after I was with you."

"God, that's fucking beautiful," Kali says, and sounds like she means it. "I've never really believed in love, but I guess you're the proof it's out there. You look happy."

"I am happy," El says. It feels even more like a confession than her pregnancy. A small part of her still thinks Kali expects her to be angry at the world, even after all these years and...and El is but she's so happy at the same time. Sometimes she wakes up next to Mike and watches him drool onto his pillow and thinks she'll die from contentment.

"You could be godmother if you want," she suddenly offers, an impulse she's unsure is socially correct. It's not something El had ever been taught, but she probably isn't supposed to offer it to the sister she'd only reunited with for a single day that almost ended in a murder back before she'd even gone through puberty. But now that it's out there, El can't think of anyone else she'd want, not even Max or Nancy.

"You'd really want me?" Kali asks. Her voice breaks a little. "After—after everything I've done?"

"You still have so much good to do," El says, picking the grocery bags back up. "Promise."

"I guess I believe you. And I guess...I guess yes."

It is the right answer. El asks if Kali wants to come back to the apartment and have some lunch with her, and thinks as they walk that she will never stop feeling like she is coming home. Over and over and over. Returning is something she will never tire of.

Author's Note:

warnings: sexual content that is definitely not implied, but isn't really explicit either? i dunno but it definitely isn't smut. discussion of ptsd, abuse, and everything else in that family of general trauma, frank discussion of puberty, sex, a brief mention of masturbation, consent issues, and all of that because i care deeply about el learning about boundaries and expressing what she wants in all her relationships.

i hope this was okay, and please tell me what you think! i love discussing characterization, and this is one of my very first attempts at characterizing el so i wanna know how i did. i feel like i was a lot younger when i wrote it, and even though i spruced it up i'm curious about how it holds up.

i just got a tumblr that i don't really know how to use at binaryisunrise.tumblr.com and i would love to follow any of my readers who are interested!

thank you to everyone who takes the time to give feedback!!